Teaching the Elephant to Dance

James Belasco (1991) used this metaphor as the title of his book promoting new paradigms of organizational change. The elephant is the ponderous structure that often evolves as organizations grow, and hierarchies, divisions, chain of command and committees are set up. The fear is that we will end up a bureaucracy – with endless red tape and out of touch with each other as human beings.

The elephant might also be found in the concept of "professionalism" with its educational and practice standards promoted through programs like accreditation and certification. The fear here is that creativity will be stifled, uniformity mandated, relevance lost and the process controlled by one group acting purely out of self-interest or a narrow perspective.

The hope is that we can teach the elephant to dance, that is, create a climate for change so that our vision of a new and better tomorrow has a chance to materialize. The old way of doing things must be reexamined, because we will not get to a different place by walking down the same old path. Lucky for us, the 1990s prove to be the age of new paradigms for leadership and management of organizations like AMTA, for businesses including massage therapy and bodywork practices, for schools, and for whole professions.

The new paradigms are not New Age fantasies or invitations to throw out standards of excellence. They are being embraced by some of the top corporations in the country who see the need for a new way of doing things in the 21st century for the survival of their businesses, of humanity, and of the planet.

Some of the central ideas in the new leadership and management paradigms revolve around ideas like interconnectedness, principle-centered action, empowerment, sharing information, importance of people and relationships, values, and participative management. They are more "ecological" and "holistic" in perspective, and they seem very fitting for a profession like ours that is seeking alternatives to the dehumanizing systems currently seen in business, government, health care and the professions.

"Teaching the elephant to dance" can be a useful metaphor for "creating the new professionalism" and "keeping heart in the accreditation (and certification) process."

Even Fritjof Capra, who has offered new paradigms for science and health care, (and is familiar to many of you as the author of *The Tao of Physics* and *The Turning Point*), is now entering the field of business management. In his new paradigm for management, Capra proposes a shift from looking at organization as machine to organization as organism, from the mechanistic to the ecological, from domination and control to cooperation and partnership, from structure to process. He calls it "systemic management" meaning "managing a business as a *living system*." (Capra 1992)

In *The Bodywork Entrepreneur* (1990), David Palmer notes that "many of the bodywork entrepreneurs are refugees from the nine-to-five world and realize that there is something inherently dehumanizing about how business [and other organizations] traditionally treated their employees and their customers." This "second wave" or industrial age paradigm includes hierarchical fixed organizational structure, mission stated in goals and strategic plans, dogmatic leadership, stability, cash as resource, status through title and rank, and focus on the institution.

In contrast, Palmer encourages massage practitioners to adopt the "third wave" management style being created for the information age. As envisioned by John Scully in his book *Odyssey*, this entails the concept of organizational structure as a network of people, mission promoted through identity/directions/values, inspirational leadership, embracing change, information as resource, status through making a difference, and focus on the individual.

A national bestseller by Stephen Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Restoring The Character Ethic* (1989), offers a principle-centered leadership paradigm. He encourages

leaders to harken back to principles as "guidelines for human conduct that are proven to have enduring, permanent value" - principles such as integrity, honesty, human dignity, service, quality, growth, patience, and nurturance. He sees change as having to happen from the inside-out, and resulting from taking responsibility for our own actions, clarifying our values, keeping our priorities straight, thinking win/win, learning to listen, engaging in creative cooperation, and renewing ourselves physically, mentally, socially and spiritually.

In *Leadership is an Art* (1989), Max DePree states that "the best management process for today's environment is participative management based on covenantal relationships." Covenantal relationships "rest on shared commitment to ideas, to issues, to values, to goals, and to management processes." Participative management "guarantees that decisions will not be arbitrary, secret, or closed to questioning." It respects people, recognizes that belief precedes policy and practices, and affirms that relationships count more than structure. DePree presents the key question in thinking about the premises behind participation: "Would you rather work as part of an outstanding group or be part of a group of outstanding individuals?"

An interesting aspect of the new developments in leadership and management theory is the comparison of characteristic styles of men and women. With a critical mass of women entering a previously male-dominated workplace, what is amounting to a clash of cultures may be occurring. The new paradigms offer a way of moving towards a better balance of the masculine and feminine styles—the yin/yang principle.

An eye-and-ear-opening book by Deborah Tannen, a linguistics professor at Georgetown University, *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation* (1990), explores the different communication styles of men and women. She believes that when men and women interact, the result is equivalent to a cross-cultural exchange with all the possibilities for misunderstanding which that might bring.

Interestingly, what Tannen describes as the characteristic communication styles of men and women sounds very much like the old and new leadership paradigms. Men tend to speak in terms of hierarchy, independence, dominance, control, and report-talk; while women tend to value relationships, communication, equality, and rapport-talk. She also points out the downside if either style dominates an environment, and suggests that each side needs to better understand the other and make appropriate adjustments for clear communication to take place.

The feminine-masculine theme is picked up in the *The Female Advantage: Women's Ways of Leadership* (1990) by Sally Helgesen. In her case studies of some of today's top women leaders, both corporate executive and entrepreneurs, Helgesen identified traits and ways of working that are very different from the ways men typically manage and lead. She found that women were more willing to share information, had identities larger than their jobs, tended to have a world focus as opposed to just the organization, scheduled more breaks to relieve stressful pacing (which makes unscheduled events seem less like crises or interruptions), and were attentive to mail as a way of sharing information. Women used words like flow, interaction, access, conduit, involvement, network, and reach—words which emphasize relationships and process. The "advantage" she sees for women leaders, is that their characteristic style closely resembles the new leadership and management paradigms for the 21st century.

Keeping in mind that the profession of massage therapy and bodywork is about 75% women with a larger than normal number of men aware of both their masculine *and* feminine aspects—it could be that our fears about the "elephant" are based on the fact that the models for management and leadership that we have seen in the past have tended not to have a balance of the feminine and masculine styles. It may be that it is not the "products" of professionalism that are to be feared (e.g. certification, educational standards, large associations) but the way that these elements are created, structured and managed. As James Belasco would put it, "The process *is* the product."

I believe that to keep the heart in our work and create the new professionalism, a balance must be found to counteract a previously unbalanced way of doing things in the workplace dominated by a masculine style. The new paradigms offer some models to achieve that balance.

To incorporate the new paradigms into our businesses and organizations will take clear vision and commitment. As DePree said about participative management, a more balanced style must arise "out of the heart and out of a personal philosophy about people." It "cannot be added to, or subtracted from, a corporate policy manual as though it were one more managerial tool." It is a whole new way of thinking and acting. Such profound changes will not occur merely by executive mandate

or rhetorical lip service. Belasco's book (1991) is worth reading as a new model for change from the ground up.

The purpose of this article is to suggest that the new leadership and management paradigms are worth looking into as part of the solution to our fears about losing an essential aspect of who we are as we grow and become more "professional." There are many written materials available on the subject—and workshops and videos, too. I encourage you to study them and consider incorporating them into your own spheres of influence—whatever that might be—your businesses, and your organizational and professional activities.

There are an increasing number of businesses and organizations that have actually put these ideals into practice successfully. If yours is one, please share your model with all of us. Together, we can discover ways to keep heart in our work and actually create the new professionalism that is the promise of the future.

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